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AUTHOR	Cox, Juanita; Webre, Elizabeth C.
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ABSTRACT

A study examined the visibility of African-American literature in middle schools. The move in middle schools of this region toward the use of authentic literature and teacher/student choice of what is read has made a dramatic impact on the reading methods courses at the local university. Two teachers sought recommendations from local librarians, their university students involved in the reading practicum, literature-based teachers in the middle schools, and available published lists of recommended titles. Over a period of 2 years, 421 middle school students were asked, through written surveys, if they had read specific titles by award winning Black authors. Results indicated that when presented with choices of themes they might want to read about, 39% said they would not want to read books in a thematic unit featuring Black authors. When surveying the 44 students in the university's reading practicum, 33 had not read any of the multicultural selections recommended and 11 of the students had read only one. These students were currently participating in a practicum in area schools where from 45% to 99% of the children were African-American. Findings suggest that teachers' desire to avoid controversial topics as well as lack of exposure and lack of interest were contributing factors. (Contains a table of data and 15 references.) (CR)

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The Visibility of African-American Literature in the Middle

Dr. Juanita Cox,Professor
Dr. Elizabeth C. Webre, Associate Professor
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
University of Southwestern Louisiana

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Visibility of African-American Literature (Running Head)

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The visibility of African-American literature in the middle

The move in the middle schools in our region toward the use of authentic literature and teacher/student choice of what is read, has made a dramatic impact on the reading methods courses at our local university. Where in the past 25 years, most of our students were involved in school based practicums which were basal centered, we found ourselves with the exciting situation of being able to help our students prepare themselves for a more holistic literature-based classroom. Most importantly, this involved making decisions about the literature they wanted to include in their lessons and units, and helping children move from fragmented skills and stories, to reading books which were not only by award winning authors, but of high interest and engaging to children.

As we wanted joint decisions on the literature we would choose to teach in our field based practicums in the middle schools, we sought recommendations from local librarians, our university students involved in the reading practicum, literature-based teachers in the middle schools in our community, and available published lists of recommended titles. Since the middle schools our university was partnered with had approximately 45% African -American children, we were especially interested in locating and including engaging titles by Black authors.

In a text on teaching multicultural literature edited by Violet Harris, Rudine Sims Bishop (1993) writes,

> Multicultural literature is one of the most powerful components of a multicultural education curriculum, the underlying purpose of which is to help to make the society a more equitable one...the choice of books to be read and discussed in the nation's schools is of paramount importance....If literature is a mirror that reflects human life, then all children who read or are read to need to see themselves reflected as part of humanity. If they are not, or if their reflections are distorted and ridiculous, there is the danger that they will absorb negative messages about themselves and people like them. Those who see only themselves or who are exposed to errors and misrepresentations are miseducated into a false sense of superiority, and the harm is doubly done. (page 43)

Statements such as this are compelling because they imply that book choices which are

made by teachers can have life-long consequences for children. Before we could go any further in our attempt to offer better choices in authentic literature for all of the children, we had basic questions we had to answer:

1) What books by Black authors had our middle school children been exposed to?
2) Would children choose titles by African- American authors if they were offered?
3) What African- American literature for middle schools had our university students read?
4) And last, how could we as teacher trainers offer choices of books about a cultural group outside of our own which would be sensitive, authentic, free of stereotyping, build self-esteem, inform, and finally, be engaging to middle school students?

Over a period of two years, we asked, through written surveys, 421 middle school children to tell us if they had read specific titles by award winning Black authors, including David Adler, Eloise Greenfield, Virginia Hamilton, Mary Hoffman, Elizabeth Howard, Jules Lester, Sharon Mathis, Phil Mendez, Walter Dean Myers, John Steptoe, and Mildred Taylor. 81% of the children could not remember reading a book by any of these authors. Many of the 19% who could remember an African- American author, had read Hundred Penny Box by Sharon Mathis (1975), which had been included in a basal anthology which was currently being used in their school.

When presented with choices about themes they might want to read about, 39% said they would not want to read books in a thematic unit featuring Black authors. Many of the children included in the survey were in classrooms of teachers who considered themselves to be literature-based, or whole language teachers, where the children were encouraged to read authentic literature, and to self-select according to their interests and abilities. We did not have information about the books which were made available to the children, or to the knowledge their teachers had of the literature which reflected the multicultural children present in their classrooms.

To answer the question, "What knowledge did our own university students have about Black authors, and what specific titles had they read, we surveyed the 44 students currently in our reading practicum. We included award winning authors who had written titles appropriate for the middle grades. Among the books on our list were two Newbery Award books, three which had won the Coretta Scott King Award, and two Newbery Honor books.

40 of the 44 students surveyed had already completed the library science course at our university where they were required to choose, read, and annotate, 40-50 books. One of the library science instructors recommended multicultural selections to be among those read. Of the total 44 students, 33 had not read any of the titles, and 11 of the students had read only one. These students were currently participating in a practicum in area schools where from 45 to 99% of the children were African American.

Left with the basic question of why our university students, middle school children, teachers and librarians, weren't choosing and offering books by Black Americans, and our own task of locating and choosing titles that would be engaging to 9 to 13 year olds, we pursued the following possibilities:

1) Was there avoidance of controversy by teachers?

2) Was there lack of interest/exposure?

3) Was there poor visibility in children's literature texts used in library science courses?

4) Was there poor visibility in selection guides?

5) What information was available in published lists of favorite books such as Children's Choices and Teachers' Choices ?

That teachers want to avoid controversial topics has been our own experience, and in addition is supported in the literature by such authorities as Rudine Sims Bishop (1993), as she writes,

> Many teachers who feel confident selecting literature on the basis of curricular goals or literary criteria lose that confidence when it comes to selecting multicultural literature. Aware of past controversies over specific books and general charges of stereotyping or racism, they fear being accused of insensitivity or worse. Feeling a lack of knowledge about cultural groups other than their own, they worry whether they can detect authenticity or its lack. (page43)

To investigate the second reason, lack of interest/exposure gave impetus to our search for the extent to which books by Black authors were visible in children's literature courses and important selection aids consulted by classroom teachers. First, two popular texts used in survey courses in children's literature were examined. In Huck, Hepler, and Hickman's Children's

Analysis of Children's Literature Selection Aids

Selection Aids	Total No. of Books Recommended	Total No. of Books by Black Authors	Percent of Books by Black Authors	No. of Books for Middle Schools	No. of Books by Black Authors for Middle Schools	% of Books by Black Authors for Middle Schools
Regie Routman's Invitations(1994)	484	33	6.80%	247	18	7.30%
Nancie Atwell's In the Middle	203	3	1.50%	203	3	1.50%
Linda Rief's Seeking Diversity: Language Arts with Adolescents	157	3	1.90%	157	3	1.90%
Children's Choices 1975-1995	2348	28	1.30%	1135	14	1.20%
Teachers' Choices 1989-1995	221	12	5.40%	152	9	5.90%
Accelerated Reader* Disks 1-350 *Books still in print	313	16	5.10%	313	16	5.10%
Notable Children's Books in Language Arts (K-8) 1991-95	88	5	5.70%	56	5	11.20%

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Literature in the Elementary School (1993), the authors include a subsection entitled "African-American Experiences in Books for Children" in the chapter entitled "Contemporary Realistic Fiction." Huck et al. mention high profile Black authors like Virginia Hamilton, Mildred Taylor, and Walter Dean Myers. Walter Dean Myers is mentioned as having won the Coretta Scott King Award four times. However, the Coretta Scott King Award is only defined in the Appendix of the text, and these award-winning books are not listed. The Caldecott and Newbery Award titles are prominently displayed.

In the 1991 edition of Norton's Through the Eyes of a Child, there is an annotated list of Black American literature, but there is no mention of the Coretta Scott King Award in the text. The 1995 edition of this text does list the award in the back of the text -with an explanation - with other book awards, but does not include the specific books, authors, or illustrators receiving the Coretta Scott King Award.

In looking for the inclusion of Black authors in selection guides popular with our literature-based middle school teachers (see Table), recommended lists from texts by Regie Routman, Nancie Atwell, and Linda Rief were examined. In Routman's Invitations (1994) out of a list of 484 recommended books, 7% are by Black authors at the middle school level. Atwell's In the Middle (1987), includes a list of "Favorite Adolescent Fiction". She prefaces the list by stating, "If I were setting up a classroom paperback library, I'd start with these titles..". Only three books by one Black author, Walter Dean Myers, appear on her list of 203 titles (1.5%). In Seeking Diversity: Language Arts with Adolescents (1992), Rief includes a list entitled "Best-Liked Books". This list includes three books by Black authors out of a total of 157 books (1.9%).

Children's Choices, a bibliography published by The International Reading Association, and included each year in the October issue of The Reading Teacher, was examined. More than 2,348 books have appeared in Children's Choices since its inception 20 years ago. As of the October 1995 list, 1,135 books have been said to be appropriate for middle schoolers. The number by Black authors is 14, a total of 1.2%. Another bibliography published by the International Reading Association and included in the November issue of The Reading Teacher since 1989, Teachers' Choices, was examined. In the six years since its inception, 221 books

appear on the recommended lists, of which 152 are appropriate for middle school, 9 (5.9%) are by Black authors.

Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts, (K-8), a listing published in the journal Language Arts described as "selected trade books for enhancing language awareness", in its titles published from 1992-1995, included 56 books for middle school children. Five of these selections were by Black authors (11%).

And finally, Accelerated Reader (1994-95), a computerized reading management program that has increased in use and popularity in our area school libraries, was examined. Titles still in print included in Disks 1-350 were examined. 16 titles out of 313 (5.1%) are by Black authors.

In summary, middle school teachers and students are not likely to choose from the many beautiful and vibrant works of literature by Black authors, until these titles become more visible in their schools and classrooms. By the year 2020, it has been projected that 46% of the nation's school population will be made up of children of color (Banks, 1991). Many of our schools in Southwest Louisiana now surpass that number. Until such lists as winners of Coretta Scott King's prestigious award are published alongside the more widely circulated Newbery and Caldecott titles, until recommended book lists include a higher percentage of Black authors, and until literature authored by all ethnic groups receive equal emphasis in colleges which train teachers, the situation is not likely to change.

A middle school student who was among those African American children who said in our survey "I wouldn't want to read a book by a Black author", wrote a letter to Mildred Taylor after finishing The Gold Cadillac (1987). She said, "I love your book...It touched my heart to hear the things you have been through in your childhood. Thanks for the story." More students "in the middle" deserve to have teachers who offer all of their students stories which will touch their hearts, and help them to grow with and through literature.

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